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How Tobacco Discriminates Against Women

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By now, you have probably heard the news – tobacco use is bad for your health. Smoking causes a variety of cancers and increases your risk of lung and heart disease, and stroke (1). What many do not realize is that women who smoke face additional health risks. Women who smoke are more likely than nonsmokers to experience (1):


- Decreased bone density
- Rheumatoid arthritis
- Cataracts
- Ulcers
- Increased healing time
- Depression
- Menstrual problems
- Menopause at an earlier age, and with more severe symptoms
- Difficulty becoming pregnant


Tobacco impacts all aspects of your life. It doesn’t matter what your interests or hobbies are –


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the effects of tobacco use will catch up to you. Are you an active, always-on-the-go person? The body of a smoker is less efficient during exercise and fatigues faster than a non-smoker (2), decreasing physical performance. Like to always look your best? Tobacco can cause excess facial hair (3), premature wrinkles and hair loss (4). For those women looking to start a family, beware. Smoking can cause infertility, preterm delivery, stillbirth, low birth-weight, and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) (5).

Myth Busters

Having worked both as a nurse and a public health educator, I have heard many claims about smoking and cigarettes that are simply not true. Here are some of the most common misconceptions among women:

Myth: Cigarettes marked “light” are less harmful to your health.

Fact: The term “light” is used by tobacco companies to describe the perceived flavor of the cigarettes. Light and ultra-light cigarettes have just as much tar and nicotine as regular cigarettes (6).

Myth: You will gain weight if you stop smoking.

Fact: If you eat more to substitute for smoking, you will gain weight. If you eat healthy and exercise after you quit, you are less likely to gain weight (7). The Department of Defense’s Quit Tobacco: Make Everyone Proud campaign has tips to help avoid weight gain while you are quitting. The National Institute of Health also offers advice via the Weight-control Information Network.

Myth: If you smoke when you are pregnant, childbirth will be easier because the baby will be smaller.

Fact: While it is true that smoking during pregnancy causes low birth-weight in 1 of 5 babies, being born underweight can lead to numerous health problems for infants, including a three to four times greater likelihood of SIDS.

Myth: Smoking relaxes you.

Fact: Feeding the addiction to nicotine causes the release of hormones and neurotransmitters that lead to feelings of pleasure and reward, but smoking negatively impacts every part of your body. Your heart, brain, lungs, blood vessels, and muscles are experiencing increased stress due to smoking (7).

Quitting smoking isn’t easy, but it is one of the most important and impactful things you can do for your health. Visit the [Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center’s Tobacco Free Living page](#), the [Department of Defense’s Quit Tobacco: Make Everyone Proud campaign](#), or the [U.S. Department of Health & Human Services’ BeTobaccoFree.gov](#) site for information, tools, and support to help you quit.

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7. University of Maryland: University Health Center. Smoking myths and facts. <http://www.health.umd.edu/smokingmythsfacts>. Accessed Oct. 2, 2013.

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